

Let's Talk!

The next VRE online forum will start on Wednesday, February 2nd at 12:00pm.



There are currently 82 questions waiting to be answered.

VRE Management:

Welcome to another On-Line Forum. This month we have Brian Johnson, Transportation Manager for Keolis. Before I get to the questions, I wanted to take a minute to remind you of our ongoing public comment period. I have three proposals in an attempt to increase capacity on our trains which include decreasing the Step-Up by no more than \$5, eliminating group fares, and restricting the bicycle policy. I encourage you to submit your comments by email, postal mail, fax, or in person at one of our public hearings. The schedule can be found on our website at <http://www.vre.org/feedback/publichearingdates.html>.

Now on to the questions!

Philip from Manassas Park, VA asks:

Will VRE consider restricting the amount of parking in order to eliminate over crowding. The parking that currently exists is more than VRE's capacity and is causing potentially dangerous overcrowding conditions on trains. I would have thought any analysis that the VRE would have done BEFORE building any parking would have included train capacity, but I guess that isn't the case. I know you're considering removing bikes from the train due to overcrowding, bikes take up 3-4 seats on a single train, this will do little to alleviate the amount of overcrowding.

VRE Management:

I understand your concern but I am currently working on ways to increase capacity on the trains right now. From past experience, limiting parking won't stop riders from getting dropped by car or bus or even carpooling to the station.

Tami from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

In weather situations, when trains are at capacity quickly why can't that train become an express? (Last week, the 309 train was at capacity by Alexandria. No joke.) Why can't the conductors make the announcement at Union Station, L'Enfant and even Alexandria that the train won't stop until maybe Woodbridge or something. I know people don't want to wait but the delays on a train that full is very very frustrating. Not to mention a hazard because people were standing in the vestibules, the aisles were almost impassable making deboarding a nightmare

VRE Management:

If the conductors feel that it is unsafe to board anymore people, they have the power to express the train, provided that they give notice to our Comm Room. I'll work with Keolis on that.

Monica from Haymarket, VA asks:

The lights were no working int he additional parking at Broad Run yesterday, 1/31. It is way too dark out there, and as a woman, I feel very unsafe taking later trains and havingt o walk to my car in the dark. When will permanent lighting be placed in the parking lots?

VRE Management:

I will look into it.

David from Spotsylvania, Va asks:

What is the likelihood of increasing the number of southbound (or westbound) riding opportunities in the morning (before noon)

VRE Management:

We would need more railcars and operating funding.

Jim from Manassas asks:

You keep talking about the new engines. After onew arives how long before it goes into service?

VRE Management:

About one week.

B from Manassas, VA asks:

You have proposed mid-term solutions to the overcrowded trains. What are the timelines (specific month) for those solutions to be implemented? I know the short-term include the reduced step-up fee.

VRE Management:

No earlier than April 1st, assuming Board approval in March.

Jeff from Centreville, VA asks:

I have a unique idea for VRE which could potentially be of great benefit for all involved. How would I go about submitting that idea?

VRE Management:

Send us an email to gotrains@vre.org.

Dawn from Burke asks:

train 324 made a short stop this morning as was announced over the speakers. Is this going to be the new procedure for Burke Center or just for today due to the rain?

VRE Management:

This is a permanent change.

Jim from Manassas asks:

I am noticing a trend on the daily download of trains being 27-29 min late but rarely 30-34 (See 26 Jan in particular). I have also been told by one conductor when I asked them about issuing FRCs since we were 31 min late to our station by USNO time, their response was only I get one, they didn't have time to issue the rest. Is the policy to only issue FRCs when asked and if it will not make them late?

VRE Management:

I stress with the crews regularly that FRCs are important customer service tools that should be handed out at the time of the qualifying delay. This includes reminders to have enough on them everyday. There are circumstances when they cannot do it on the train and crews then should apologize, explain why they couldn't, and ask riders to fill out a form that can be found on our website.

James from Stafford asks:

Just curious about the trailer and equipment parked at Leeland Road Station. This gear is occupying several parking spaces close to the station. Any chance it could be moved to a location further out in the lot? Additionally, trains 302 and 303 have been near perfect for arrival times, keep up the good work!

VRE Management:

I'll look into it and thanks for the compliment.

Jamie from Fredericksburg asks:

It seems that communication at Union Station especially on Fridays when Amtrak has all of the lines tied up is dismal. Can't VRE or Keolis have someone at the station to communicate what is going on? Can we get a dedicated track like MARC has on track 28? There have been several times that a MARC employee has let us know about traffic issues delays etc.. With no PA system

in place it would be helpful. I know weather has been playing a part in the traffic issues and getting an opening but let us know.

VRE Management:

I am working to have a monitor installed at Union Station like we have at our other stations and should be complete within the next few weeks and should significantly improve communication with our Union Station riders.

Greg from Gainesville asks:

Broad Run - Riders tend to over crowd one particular car in the afternoon. Additional access ramps would be very helpful in alleviating that problem as well as the single egress congestion on the platform. Could two ramps be added at the ends of the platform? Thanks!

VRE Management:

We're looking into additional points of egress as part of some upcoming projects at the Broad Run station which could include lengthening the platform or the parking garage.

Rick from Stafford, VA asks:

Those of us on the Fredericksburg line who braved conditions (01/27/11) were greeted by a litany of delays (and one cancellation) due to various equipment problems. We're talking about trains running an hour and a half behind schedule. Besides the monotonous Train 3## is delayed by XX minutes due to XX, is there some way - any way to let us know if the train is even moving? A couple of the trains affected were stopped and on hold closer to Fredericksburg. It would of helped some of us to decide whether or not we should make alternate transportation plans or even just go back home. Thanks!

VRE Management:

We try to be concise and informative in our communication and assume riders have been following the previous messages to understand what is going on so we don't have to repeat information. We will try to remember some riders are just reading the last message and will attempt to put messages in context.

MJBucci from Leeland St. asks:

Is there a start date for the lot expansion at Leeland St? Will the additional lot expand South {towards the woods}?

VRE Management:

Start date could be late summer and will expand towards the woods with about 200 spaces.

Adam from **Woodbridge VA** asks:

There are people who continuously take up two parking spots in the VRE Woodbridge station parking garage. This practice is becoming consistent more and more every day. Not only is this inconsiderate and inconveniencing other drivers, its making it difficult to find a spot in the morning rush hour in an already limited spaced garage. What will be done to curb this habit? If nothing is done this will only encourage drivers that its OK to take up two parking spaces and will perpetuate the problem.

VRE Management:

I will talk to Prince William County Police and see if they can monitor this for us.

Karl from **Haymarket, VA** asks:

Now that the Broad Run station has increased parking do you plan to increase the number of handicap parking spaces? They are always fully used early each day and several handicap riders are forced to find a distant parking spot.

VRE Management:

I'll look into it.

Linda from **Bristow** asks:

When will wifi be available on the trains? And I also would like to say that our Conductors Rufus and Tariq are as good as it gets. I'm glad they are apart of your change from Amtrak. They bring life to the train and are true professionals. Thank you guys!

VRE Management:

We are still working out the details. When we figure out a timeline, we'll let you know. You compliments have been passed onto Keolis.

Luther from **Manassas Park, VA** asks:

I have heard the Keolis has requested an increase in their contract amount. Is this correct? If it is correct, what is the basis for this request?

VRE Management:

Keolis did not request an increase. But we have asked for an increase for the contract amount based on adding additional service such as the express train.

Luther from **Manassas Park** asks:

Are the new coaches having difficulty dealing with higher levels of humidity? It is not always on rainy / snowy days. Some days it is just cold outside. Condensation is running down the interior of the windows making it difficult to see where we are.

VRE Management:

We are moving the thermostats and adjusting their position in all the cars to reduce the condensation. All cars should be complete in the next six months.

Phil from Rolling Road asks:

Last month I asked about the lights at the Rolling Road station. You indicated that you were aware that there were lights that were out and that you would contact Fairfax County. The lights are still out and it has created a very dangerous situation, especially with the snow and ice that we've been having. What's the story? Why is it taking them so long to fix this safety hazard? I hope it doesn't take someone getting seriously injured before it gets the attention it deserves.

VRE Management:

I have been speaking with Fairfax County about the situation and they were waiting on Dominion Power to get the lights back on. My understanding was that power was restored last Friday. I will follow up and find out why the lights are still out.

Fred from Fairfax asks:

Mr. Zehner, please give an update on the delivery of the new locomotives. Thank you.

VRE Management:

V50, V51, & V52 are currently on property and in service. Motive Power is shipping one new locomotive every other week and have been on schedule. However, transit times from the Midwest have been delayed due to the winter weather. I expect all trains to have a new locomotive by May.

Kelly Jean from Manassas, VA asks:

Can you ask the people who salt/shovel the platform at Manassas to also sprinkle a little salt on street path that leads from the parking garage to the station at Manassas when it's icy? They do a great job on the platforms but always skip this part. It's probably done by the town eventually but not early enough in the AM and it's slippery at 5am.

VRE Management:

I will talk with the City.

Max from Fredericksburg asks:

Have you had any success in getting us a better deal for the Amtrack Step up.

VRE Management:

The short answer is no. The long answer is that I had proposed buying down the Step-Up to reduce the costs to our riders. That is one of the items up for public comment. If you have an opinion, please make sure it is heard.

Tom from Bristow VA asks:

Safety concerns: How about an safety POLICY that a backpack comes off the rider before boarding and doesn't go back on the shoulders of the rider until the rider disembarks (totally off the train and away from people tired of getting whacked). Upper deck customers already seated constantly are getting slammed in the shoulder, neck, or side of the face - it isn't pleasant. When a person with a backpack disembarks it's all for one regardless if it's up or down stairs. It's gotten worse than an aisle seat on a plane. THIS WOULD ALSO LOAD/UNLOAD TRAINS FASTER

VRE Management:

This is more of a courtesy issue. We will also remind passengers in Train Talks and announcements.

Mary from Lorton, VA asks:

Do they plan to add more handicap parking at the Lorton station?

VRE Management:

I don't have any plans at this time however I will look into making sure we are providing an adequate number of spaces.

Dave from Woodbridge asks:

Each morning the Express papers are available for all Metro riders. Would it be possible to have these Express papers available at all VRE stops each morning?

VRE Management:

I suggest you contact the Washington Post and express your interest in them having the Express Paper available there.

Linda from Manassas asks:

Riders with carry-on items that do not fit under their seat place the items directly in the aisle. Many times you can't see the trailing strap or paper bag(s) until it's too late. Conductors do nothing about this.

VRE Management:

I will ask the conductors to look out for this. I'll also work on reminding our riders.

Deb from Spotsy asks:

I was really upset when a guy got on with his full size bike at Quantico and made a person move so he could sit down with his bike. Really!! Is this legal?

VRE Management:

Please make a comment to publiccomment@vre.org. I am specifically asking the Board to prohibit full-size bikes on the trains. Your comment is important.

John from Burke asks:

Can you please have the vestibule doors for car V425 fixed? It's hung open almost every morning on train 324 for more than a week. I expected the conductor to report after dealing with it for several days. HELP.

VRE Management:

I'll have those doors looked at tonight.

Kevin from Manassas asks:

It is very difficult to schedule an appointment in the morning b/c the last train from Manassas is 7:56. Has it ever been considered to add a mid-morning train northbound, similar in concept to the mid-afternoon (1:15) train southbound?

VRE Management:

Since you show that you are from Manassas, with the Step-Up ticket you can take advantage of Amtrak 176 in the morning, which departs Manassas at 10:19. While you do have to pay that Step-Up fee, it does add that degree of flexibility you are looking for.

Andrew from Fredericksburg asks:

Thank you for providing a safe and easy way in and out of DC without having to ride on I95. The next problem I have is the Fredericksburg overflow lot by the VRE maintenance building the potholes are getting bigger and bigger everyday. Not to mention that you can hardly find a space there after 7:15am (which is a good thing for VRE) but one main reason is that people like

to take up two spaces so that no one will damage their car but why not a friendly reminder on the train and at the parking lots that there are others who need to park there too. Thanks for you time.

VRE Management:

I will have the pot holes looked into and issue courtesy announcements.

Marianne from Burke, VA asks:

I just want to let you both know what an excellent job the crew of train 327 did during last Wednesday's snowstorm. They made announcements on the location of available seats and made the smart call to make dual stops and Rolling and Backlick Roads, as passengers were unable to walk up the crowded aisles. Keolis has gotten a lot of criticism, but this crew really stepped up to the plate. Thank you.

VRE Management:

I appreciate your compliments and will pass them along.

Bev from Burke asks:

First off, I think that you all are doing a great job. I have a question regarding early dismissal. Is it possible on the days that the Federal Government sends workers home early to move a later train to between the 1:15pm and 3:45pm, say 2:30pm? I have a friend that rides Marc. On Wednesday, they cancelled the second to last train and added a 2:30pm train. I thought that was a great idea. It would be great for the early people who end up waiting around for the 3:45pm. That extra hour early would have beat the snow and the 3:45pm wouldn't have been so overcrowded. Thank you.

VRE Management:

When we have done that in the past, the word doesn't get around and we end up with a lot of upset people that didn't get the memo and miss the train we added and wait for a train that never shows up.

Greg from Woodbridge asks:

Last month I asked about 303 having recurring issues leaving the yard late on Fridays. You responded that you weren't aware of any such issue. It appears that it is getting even worse. This past Friday and Monday 303 was late due to rail congestion in union Station.

VRE Management:

Two Fridays out of four, 303 was late getting to Union. I will continue to monitor the situation.

Robert from Haymarket, VA asks:

Are there plans to increase service on the Manassas Line??

VRE Management:

I would love to increase service on the Manassas Line. Currently I do not have the funding or the space to do so.

chaz from burke,va asks:

Dale - can you please admit that the burke centre garage did not need 1350 or so spots in this built out area and dropping a level would have saved vre and fairfax (who funded much) a significant amount of money to use for better purposes. The garage runs at about half full bc there are not that many people in this dense area who ride or ever will be. A 1000 person garage and take the extra level millions elsewhere. And 'well fairfax and bulova wanted it that high and kicked money for it' is not an excuse for this mismanagement!

VRE Management:

The garage was sized for future growth.

Matt from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Are there any plans to extend the platforms to match the train lengths at stations (such as Leeland) in order to allow for quicker loading and unloading of passengers and thus reduced travel times?

VRE Management:

Yes there are long term plans to extend the length of the platforms. This is dependant on funding and I don't have a current timeline for Leeland Road at this time.

Juan from Rolling Road Station asks:

When do your people do the stats on # of cars in the lot for stations?? They always say 92 or 94% for Rolling Road --- and it is ALWAYS at well over 100% capacity with cars lined up both sides of the street and side street -- 99%+ of the days.... Can your staff count? or do they not show up after the last train? Please recheck and show us the correct info so u know where resources need to go to get some options (if any)

VRE Management:

Those numbers are averages. While most days the lot is full, there are days it is not, like Fridays or days with inclement weather that brings the average down.

Charles from Montclair asks:

I sometimes do a step up on 86 at Quantico and the train frequently comes to the far track. The lack of a platform is worse than Alexandria in terms of having to jump off or climb on to the train. The question is when the Arkendale track is added, will a proper platform be built on the west side of the tracks?

VRE Management:

Good question. The long term plan is to have suitable second platforms at all stations, including Quantico, to allow for flexibility in train operations that would minimize delays. I see the immediate need for Quantico since Amtrak trains normally operate on that far track.

Don from Burke asks:

Thanks for adjusting the stopping points for the trains at Burke Centre in the morning. Its a great idea and the announcements in the newsletter and over the PA system at the station did a good job of informing all the riders about the change. In fact almost everyone had shifted towards the parking garage this morning in anticipation of the change. Unfortunately, it would appear that nobody told the engineer on train 326 this morning because they went past the old stops and further from the parking garage.

VRE Management:

Thanks for letting me know. Stopping a train at a certain point is much more technical than stopping a car but the engineers should be stopping closer to the garage as we have announced. I will have the situation monitored.

Not Special from Woodbridge, VA asks:

Dale, I know you're considering some policy changes due to the crowding on some trains. Would you also consider suspending the Quiet Car designation when trains are over capacity? It doesn't seem right that an entire car remains "reserved" for those who want a particular atmosphere (and who often behave like vigilantes!)I know VRE would get some backlash from those "special" people, but I think VRE could easily defend the decision.

VRE Management:

I'll look into it.

Mark from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

We have this nice, new walkway over the tracks at the Woodbridge station whose door is located next to the PRTC bus stop. Why is that door locked with signs that say you have to enter from the other side of the station?

VRE Management:

Once the kiss-and-ride design is approved and constructed, that door will be open. Until then, VDOT has asked that the door remain locked.

Tracy from Rolling Road asks:

1. Could you please explain how the automated announcements work (i.e, distance, GPS, manual push button, etc.)? 2. Could you explain why Keolis still can't operate them correctly when Amtrak was fine? Please don't ask for specific train numbers like you always do. It is a system wide problem.

VRE Management:

Even Amtrak had problems with the automatic announcements when we first got them. We have our a member of our mechanical team making rounds with all the crews to ensure they all know how to properly use the system. For all riders, please let us know via gotrains@vre.org when the automatic system isn't working and crews aren't announcing the stations manually.

Greg from Woodbridge asks:

What impact would House Bill 2016 have on VRE?

VRE Management:

That bill has been referred to a committee for study and will not be brought up again until 2012.

Manassas from Manassas asks:

Ellen has continued to bring her professionalism and kindness to her job every day. It shows in her smile while she greets her riders while checking tickets. Ellen seems to bring out the best in her riders. Keep up the good work. Thank you Ellen.

VRE Management:

I will pass the kind words along to Conductor Ellen Meadows.

Al from Virginia asks:

I have had a lot of trouble with the fare machines at the stations. Do they get regular maintenance, or do they just get repaired when there is a problem reported? Are there plans to replace/upgrade them?

VRE Management:

Our TVMs receive regular preventative maintenance in addition to be repaired when problems happen. When you notice a problem please be sure to let us know so we can look into it for you.

In the meanwhile, we have hired a consultant to help write the specifications for a new fare collection system.

Evelyn from Woodbridge asks:

Dale: Can you please explain what you meant by Keolis providing "enhanced customer service" over Amtrak? Less reliability, less ticket checking, and the inability to operate automated announcements don't seem enhanced, do they? Oh, I guess you did say their uniforms would be different.....

VRE Management:

We have received both positive and negative comments on the new crews. I am working to have customer service consistent on all trains.

Jim from Fredericksburg, VA asks:

Before winter is out, do you think you can teach your train crews to turn on the floor heaters? Our feet freeze! There's no use having these if you don't use them. Some of the folks on 306 refer to it as the Polar Express!

VRE Management:

The floor heaters should come on automatically. I will ask our Mechanical Director to take a look at that trainset.

Cheri from Burke Centre asks:

Please consider training some passengers that ride the entire line (end to end) on the announcement system. Then they might actually work correctly. What is the deal? Is it that hard? It is our laughing point every day (I know, it's not much, but it's guaranteed every day after a long day at work).

VRE Management:

I have received many comments about this issue and please be assured it is being addressed.

Edward from Lorton, VA asks:

I am asking for a change in leadership on VRE's board, starting with the CEO. The past year's problems that still are occurring in the current year are a sure sign that the leadership at the top of the VRE ladder needs to be changed out. We need new leadership that understands the challenges of today and also has better planning for the future of VRE.

VRE Management:

Certainly there are challenges that VRE is currently facing. However, there has been a lot of improvements made over the last several years. Our ridership is the highest it has ever been, our relationship with our host railroad partners have improved significantly, we have 71 new cars with 20 new locomotives arriving, new garages and platforms have been built. Does this mean that all of our problems are solved, no. We are continuing to work through these problems and will continue to improve the overall service.

Debbie from Fredericksburg asks:

Sure wish we could get a parking garage that is closer to the train station. Would this be possible?

VRE Management:

Councilman Howe has asked us to look in to the parking situation in Fredericksburg. He has asked us to establish a working group which will convene in the next few weeks. I'll let you know if anything positive comes out of it.

Bruce from Gainesville, VA asks:

Congratulations on Mannassas line on-time performance. Much better than fall of 2010. Thanks

VRE Management:

Thank you. Keolis and VRE have worked very hard to improve reliability.

Bob from Gainesville asks:

Look we need more seats on the trains. Stop all the discussion and do whatever it takes to get more. If it terminates trains at L'enfant just do it. People will take other trains and if not and stop riding then we'll have more seats. Stop the talking!

VRE Management:

I hear you, Bob. Unfortunately I cannot increase capacity overnight but am actively working on it.

Kathy from Rippon asks:

There was a rumor around work that a Fredericksburg train ran a stop signal several weeks ago just outside Union Station. The crew was removed by Amtrak. We then confirmed this with one of the conductors on a later train (honesty goes a long way). VRE reported the train cancellation as "signal problems." Shouldn't VRE be more honest - after all, VRE says safety is priority. How

many other safety issues happened that VRE does not report to authorities or tell passengers about?

VRE Management:

I prefer to be as transparent as possible in all matters. However, I also don't want to make statements prematurely. When an allegation is made, there is always a thorough investigation. Until then, I am not going to make a public comment. The final report is pending.

Cary from Burke asks:

What's with the latest problem - congestion in Union Station delaying VRE trains. Is this another VRE excuse, or Amtrak giving VRE the business?

VRE Management:

Amtrak has provided very good service to VRE. The recent delays have been caused by late trains coming off the corridor because of the winter weather north of DC.

VRE Management:

thank you for your comments this month. Again I want to encourage you to participate in the public comment period. Your opinion matters so please tell us how you feel about these proposals. Next month's On-Line Forum will be Wednesday, March 2nd. Fredericksburg Line Transportation Manager Chipp Boone will be joining us (and today is his birthday). I look forward to chatting with you next month.
-Dale